

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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THE CHURCH IS LIKE...

When God, through Isaiah, warned Judah and Jerusalem of the consequences of their rebellion He compared them to “a shelter in a vineyard and a watchman’s hut in a cucumber field” (Isa. 1:8). No vinedresser would build a shelter in his vineyard. This would block the sunlight needed to ripen the grapes. And why build a watchman’s hut in a cucumber field? Cucumbers would probably never be in the danger of being stolen. These words show the uselessness of God’s people in fulfilling their God-given calling. Jesus compared the people of his day who rejected his message as “children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children and say, ‘We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn’” (Matt. 11:16,17). Permit me to make some comparisons concerning the church today.

THE SNARE OF SUBSTITUTES

A church caught in the snare of substitutes is like a man filling his car’s gas tank with water. We have an interesting story of substitutes in the book of I Kings. “And King Solomon made 200 large shields of beaten gold, using 600 shekels of gold on each large shield, and made 300 shields of beaten gold, using three minas of gold on each shield, and the king put them in the house of the forest of Lebanon” (I Kings 10:16,17). After the death of Solomon we have this word: “Now it came about in the fifth year of King Rehoboam, that Shishak the king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. And he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king’s house, and he took everything, even taking all the shields of gold which Solomon had made. So King Rehoboam made shields of bronze in their place, and committed them to the care of the commanders of the guard who guarded the doorway of the king’s house” (I Kings 14:25-27). The magnificence of gold was exchanged for cheapness and gaudiness of bronze. It gave the appearance of gold, but was counterfeit. They looked the same but the substance had changed.

Today’s Rehoboam’s are the false teachers who substitute bronze tradition for the gold of the gospel. Jude calls them “clouds without water” and “autumn trees with no fruit” (Jude 12) and Peter says they are “springs without water” (II Pet. 2:17). Some common substitutes in the religious world today are the same ones recorded in the Word. Romans 1:25: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator...” The peril of this substitute is seen in the results of their actions. Three times in this passage (verses 18-32) the Apostle states that “God gave them over to their own lusts, to degrading passions and to a depraved mind” resulting in raw idolatry, lustful homosexuality and what he calls “all unrighteousness” making them in God’s sight “worthy of death”. Other substitutes we will mention without comment are: The substitute of myths for sound doctrine, II Tim. 4:2-4: “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.” The

substitute of tradition for the Word, Mark 7:8, 13: “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men...thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down...” the substitute of the immortality of the soul for the resurrection I Cor. 15:17,18: “and if Christ has not been raised your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.” There are numerous substitutes we could mention, but consider the most serious that of a substitute Jesus. To the people who were converted under the ministry of the Apostle Paul and had been taught by the Apostles, he wrote: “If one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully” (II Cor. 11:4). There are two ways that we can be guilty of a substitute Jesus. First is like the religious leaders in his day, we make Jesus less than the Son of God. John 5:18 “...the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God.” They said he blasphemed because he said, “I am the son of God” (Jn. 10:36). The second way we can make him a substitute Jesus is to make him more than the Son of God. I Jn. 4:2,3: “By this we know the spirit of God, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God, this is the spirit of the anti Christ” To deny that Jesus is the Son of God is to deny his saving power and to deny that He was the son of man is to deny his intercessory power as our High Priest.

THE DRY ROT OF COVETOUSNESS

A covetous church is like a house infected with fungus...you can’t tell from the outside if it is full of dry rot, because covetousness is a sin of the heart. Let’s define some terms: “Dry rot” is decay of seasoned wood caused by attacks of any number of specie of fungi. These fungi penetrate the interior timbers and consume the wood fibers, leaving the timbers porous, although the wood may appear to be sound on the surface. “Covetousness” is many times translated “lust” but in and of itself it means “a strong desire”. For example we read in Luke 22:15 the words of Jesus, “with desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you” and I Cor. 12:31: “But earnestly desire the greater gifts.” Scriptural covetousness that is condemned is a desire for anything forbidden, an internal desire, a drive, a lust, includes every illicit desire and is a form of idolatry (Col. 3:5). If Covetousness is a sin of the individual heart how can we speak of a covetous church? Three reasons: First, it is in epistles written to churches that we have warnings against covetousness. I Cor. 10:1-11 the Apostle lists the sins of Israel in the wilderness and states that “these things happened as examples to us, that we should not crave evil things as they craved” (ver. 6). James 4:1-4 is a good example of the danger of covetousness. He shows that covetousness breeds quarrels, conflicts, wars and even murder. The covetous person makes himself an enemy of God. Heb10:5 urges us to be content with what we have because we have the promise that God will never desert nor forsake us.

Second, the character of the members of a church determines the character of the church. The church is what its members are. That is why God judged Ananias and Sapphira so harshly (Acts 6) and why Paul states in I Cor. 5:6,7 "...do you not know a little leaven leavens the whole lump, clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump". Randall Balmer in his book *Grant Us Courage* tells of speaking with members of a certain mega-church who delighted to quote random statistics about their building from a fact sheet distributed by the church which pointed out the new building had required 10,000 gallons of paint, had 1285 doors, 1,000,000 feet of sheetrock, 87 public telephones, 20 kitchens, 40 restrooms and 10 private restrooms. The worship center seats 7,000 with an additional 310 for the choir and 100 for the orchestras, they were happy to point all this out. Plus the fact that outside there are 31 acres of asphalt, 8 miles of curbing and parking places for 3,500 cars. One wonders what the man from Galilee who had no place to lay his head thinks of this.

Third, the scriptures characterize false prophets as being covetous. II Peter 2:1-3 shows that "false prophets arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned." Can you find any better description of the religious situation in our land today? But he continues by pointing out that "in their greed (covetousness) they will exploit you with false words..." He notes further that these false teachers "have a heart trained in greed" (ver.14).

The church in Laodicea (Rev. 3) shows its covetousness when it said "I am rich and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." Christ's answer was "you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." This is the dry rot of covetousness in the church today.

THE VICE OF SLOTH

A church that is lazy is like a clock that can't run. It is not fulfilling the purpose for which it was made. Laziness is like a boil, although it is a local infection its effects are felt over the entire body. The core must be dealt with before a cure is affected. Webster defines sloth as "the disinclination to action or labor, indolence, spiritual apathy and inactivity, laziness." The Greek word for sloth is translated "a gray, gloomy state of mind, inclined to melancholy, a state of listlessness, idleness, indifference to good, a dull sadness which takes away any interest in mental or bodily activity." We would say that sloth is the desire for ease even at the expense of doing the will of God.

"Sloth" is also the name of a three toed animal, native to South America, that hangs down from trees. Sloth in the church is also a three toed animal: spiritual sloth, intellectual sloth and physical sloth. Spiritual sloth Rom. 12:11 "...not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord..." and Rom. 13:11 "And this do, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep..." The antithesis of these passages is I Cor. 15:58: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." Intellectual sloth: Eph.

5:17 "So then do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is..." Colossians 1:9 is typical of the many prayers Paul prayed for the churches he had established: "...we have not ceased to pray for you and ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding..." God created man with a brain and becoming a Christian does not change that fact. Physical sloth: Eph. 4:28: "Let him who steals steal no longer, but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands, what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who is in need." II Thess. 3:10,11: "...if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life..."

A lazy church is a contradiction of terms. The church is pictured as "running a race, laboring together with God, building and battling, fighting a battle, sowing seed and reaping a harvest." The book of Proverbs is a classic on slothfulness. This writer takes the ant as an illustration showing it, unlike some church members, does not have to be prodded, pushed or pulled in order to do what is right (6:6-11). The slothful will turn to exaggeration and excuse making instead of doing the Lord's will (22:13; 26:13). Proverbs 26:15 is a jewel on the subject. "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, he is weary of bringing it to his mouth again." He is too lazy to eat. God has given the food of His Word, our hands are on it and we are too lazy to apply it.

The classic example of a slothful church is Laodicea (Rev. 3:15-16). It was lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. This has been interpreted as if hot meant godly and cold meant ungodly. When Christ says "I would that you were cold or hot" is said that he prefers outright apostasy to middle-of-the-road living. However there might be another explanation. Laodicea was situated between two other cities, Colossae and Hieropolis. Colossae was watered by icy streams flowing down from towering mountains. In contrast Hieropolis was famous for its hot mineral springs which flowed out of the city down into Laodicea. By the time the water reached the valley floor, it was lukewarm, putrid and nauseating. At Colossae one could be refreshed with clear, cold invigorating drinking water; at Hieropolis one could be healed by bathing in its hot, mineral pools. At Laodicea the waters were neither hot (for health) nor cold (for drinking). The church proved neither refreshing for the spiritually weary nor healing for the spiritually sick. Thus "you are neither hot nor cold." They had no influence upon society. They were a slothful church.

THE SPECTER OF PROFESSIONALISM

A church guilty of professionalism is like an artificial rose. It looks like the real thing, especially from a distance. It can fool the casual observer and may add a certain charm to a room, but it has never fooled a bee. It has no aroma. A church guilty of professionalism has become cold and indifferent to the needs of others, has no real interest in anyone or anything outside its own immediate circle, and offers no real service to those suffering in body and soul. On the other hand a professional church is always busy and faithful in certain areas of life, especially church life, which do not touch the real purpose of the church's existence. "Professionalism" is a hard subject to deal with when applied to the church. We have no trouble spotting professionalism in ministers who are pompous and arrogant. But we seldom picture churches as being professional. However,

churches are as guilty as preachers. Many times the failure of the preacher is clearly seen, but the failure of the people go unrecognized. Note these Scriptures: Jer. 5:30, 31: "An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority, and My people love it so...!" II Tim. 4:3,4: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled they accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own lusts, and will turn away their ears from the truth and turn aside to fables."

A classic example is the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1-5). There was nothing false being taught...no Balaam, and no Nicolaitans, as in Pergamum, no Jezebel as in Thyatira and there was no suffering and persecution as in Smyrna and Philadelphia. Rather Sardis was humming with activity. It evidently had excellent projects going with no lack of money, talent or manpower. The indictment from the one who had the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars was "you have a name that you are alive, and you are dead." Sardis had come to terms with its pagan environment. A church guilty of professionalism has a name for being alive, but does not have the life. In their dead professionalism they experienced neither theological controversy nor persecution. As G.B. Caird wrote: "Content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance, it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting." Isn't it strange that with the churches showing the greatest membership and financial growth in history, we now have the worst crime record in the world? Isn't strange also, that in a day when architecture and sculpture were at their best, the Apostles and the early Christians had no use for them as a means of "attraction" to the church. Instead they used the truth. The power of salvation is in the gospel, not being professional in the eyes of the world.

Another classic example of religious professionalism is found in Isaiah chapter one in his description of the nation of Israel in his day. They offered multiplied sacrifices and burnt offerings, appeared before God with their offerings, were careful to keep the new moons, Sabbaths, festivals and appointed feasts. They burnt incense and spread out their hands in prayer, but God said "I am weary of bearing all this...they are an abomination to Me." In our worship there is a certain "professionalism" properly viewed, but there is a grave danger that we become worshipers of worship and perform religious acts in the same unfeeling manner as the nation of Israel in Isaiah's day. This is the modern picture of the specter of professionalism.

THE SPECIALIZATION OF SYMPTOMS

The church that specializes in symptoms is like a Doctor prescribing a placebo. The patient thinks the placebo is the real medicine that will answer the problem when it is of no value in curing the real cause of illness. The church that is specializing in symptoms rather than the disease is when the agenda is to be popular rather than prophetic, mystical rather than holy, successful rather than obedient and to entertain rather than to apply the Word of God in a personal way; when sentimentalism, melancholy and frenzy are thought to be the primary evidences of God's presence; when people stop taking their Bibles to services and there are no Sunday evening nor mid-week services;

when people consult their horoscopes daily and Holy Spirit never, than they have become a church specializing in symptoms to the neglect of the real disease. How long are our artificial life supports going to last? Further evidence that today's religious world is dealing with symptoms rather than the disease is seen in the fact that we are over run with consultants, parachurch ministries, publishing houses, conventions and seminars, and religious book stores, all telling us they have the answers to the churches problems, when the answer to all our problems could be found if we would only return to the Word of God as our only standard of faith and practice.

A good example of dealing with the disease and not the symptom is seen in the life of Noah. In contrast with the syrupy sentimental sermons heard in today's pulpits Noah is said to be "a preacher of righteousness" (II Peter 2:5), a man who was in covenant with God (Gen.6:18), and he was "moved with fear" to faithfulness, whereby he "became heir of the righteousness which is by faith" (Heb. 11:7). These early days in the history of man were tyrannical, degenerate, and unbelieving, but the times are spoken of in I Peter 3:20 as "the days of Noah" not the days of unprecedented evil. When Noah set out to build the ark in obedience to God's command, he did not waste his time on the obvious symptoms. He did not document the corruption around him, whine and moan because of the world's condition or complain about how unjust the system was. In fact he didn't set out to change the system. He built the ark.

The problem with the modern church is that it has misdiagnosed its disease, and we have busied ourselves with treating symptoms instead of attacking the real problem. The fundamental problem of the church is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music. As we squander our God given resources trying to bandage these symptoms we do nothing to cure the real problem which is the fact that, like Israel in the Old Testament, we have forgotten God and turned to inconsequential resources that puts truth at a distance, makes grace too ordinary, the gospel too easy, the judgment unnecessary and Christ far too common. A symptom of all this is that the church continues on the chosen path of meeting the felt needs of a generation that insists that God himself is second to organization and image, and that the church's health lies in its flow charts, its convenience, its ability to entertain, its short sermons and lack of anything that offends anyone, while the real disease is they have either forgotten or replaced God with modern ingenuity.

An illustration of how we have specialized in symptoms and neglected the real disease is in the area of immorality. No one can deny that the spirit of immorality has taken over the country. In the "free love" decade of the 1960's the new left refashioned immorality into a new image. Under the guise of moral freedom pornography, homosexuality, pedophilia, adultery and abortions have become not only the accepted standard of behavior but is actually celebrated as the symbol of liberation from the old fashioned idea of a moral standard of right and wrong. As a result of this thinking we are faced with an epidemic of AIDS which has siphoned money and resources away from needed research and treatment of such diseases as cancer and cardiovascular diseases. We are told that the revenues from pornography exceed that of professional football, basketball and

baseball combined. Statistics show that over 40 million American adults regularly visit over 372 million published pornographic web pages. Is it any wonder these other sins of immorality mentioned above are running rampant in our society? Data from the Center for Disease Control's budget summary back in FY 2004 shows that the total spent on AIDS/HIV was \$1,862,282,000. So we can say immorality is not the problem. All these things are simply symptoms of a greater problem. Symptoms are important and sometimes serious, but it is wrong to treat symptoms and not the underlying disease. What is the problem? It is the philosophy behind all this immorality, namely the rejection of the fact that man is a sinner and has separated himself from God. The Apostle Paul stated it this way: "As they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things that are not proper" (Rom. 1:28), such as same sex-marriage.

Pornography is a symptom of the thoughts of man's heart being evil continually (Gen. 6:5). John lists "the lust of the eyes" as symptom of man's love of the world (I John 2:16). Pornography is an addiction because "The eyes of man are never satisfied (Prov. 27:20; Eccle. 1:8; 4:8). Jesus said "every one who looks upon a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart...if your right eye makes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it from you..." (Matt. 5:28,29). With the advent of HBO and the internet, pornography is no longer hidden behind the counters but is piped into homes and has become a number one problem with parents who want to protect their children from the filth being spewed out by the purveyors of the "new freedom" which has no respect for anything decent or godly. Such misfits as the ACLU contend that child pornography is protected by "freedom of speech." In his book *The Enemy Within* Michael Savage speaks of colleges and universities who "invite prostitutes as guest speakers, think there's nothing odd about assigning pornography for homework, and encourage class trips to strip clubs." However one does not have to visit the porn shops or use the internet to be exposed to porn. Even the advertisements on T.V. and magazines displayed in our grocery stores are loaded with pornography. The latest venture into the twilight zone of immorality is the fact that the state of California is considering making prostitution legal, and the prostitutes are insisting they be organized into a recognized labor force. Having said all this we conclude that pornography is only a symptom, a symptom of a society that has no regard for God.

Likewise adultery is a symptom showing that society has rejected any moral standard and makes normative anything anyone chooses to do. Again John lists "the lust of the flesh" as symptom of man's love of the world (I John 2:16). The institution of marriage and the family is being steadily dismantled as our society has embraced Freud's theory of sexuality and rejected the Biblical teaching on these subjects. Our children grow up in secular schools in which they learn that values are relative, they are animals, and they cannot be expected to control their sensual desires. They are given condoms (as advocated by former U.S. Surgeon General and "evangelical Christian", C. Everett Koop) and taught how to use them. It is not only the schools that have contributed to lax morality, government policies over the past few years have been hostile to marriage and the family unit. Our society is gradually accepting

the fact that marriage and family is no longer important. In this climate is it any wonder that couples living together without or before marriage is the accepted standard and that young people feel justified in engaging in pre-marital sex. That millions of couples can rationalize breaking their marriage vows? Adultery is a symptom of a greater disease, the rejection of God's standard or morality and decency.

In the first chapter of Romans Paul points out that homosexuality (and we can include all sins of immorality) is a symptom of the fact that mankind refuses to honor God as God (verse 24). This is a result of God giving them over to do as they pleased because of their rejection of His divine revelation. Three times he states that "God gave them over to the lust of impurity, to degrading passions and to a depraved mind." How can anyone read "God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions, for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward on another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error, and just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind to do those things which are not proper" (Rom. 1:24-28) and still say that the homosexual life style is natural? (If the new left has its way any preacher preaching these things will probably be arrested). All these are symptoms of a society that has rejected God and been left to their own desires. Add to this another symptom of the fact that they have refused to acknowledge God: In the U.S. there are 1.37 million abortions performed each year and 3,700 performed per day. In the words of Paul, "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22).

PUT CHRIST BACK IN CHRISTMAS?

A common phrase heard among many Christians this time of the year is "Let's put Christ back in Christmas." My thought is "was he ever in Christmas?" How can we put him back if he were never there in the first place? How can we say he was never in Christmas? Simply because Christmas is not a Christian holiday. In fact there is perhaps one day that is given any preeminence over another day in the Scriptures and that is the first day of the week. There is no indication that the birth of Christ was intended to be celebrated by a special day. The problem with special days is they are too limited. Every day is a celebration for the Christian, a celebration of his birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and present ministry on our behalf, and a celebration of who we are in him.

Put Christ into Christmas? No, don't make him a part of the Santa and his reindeer myth, don't include him in the unwise and foolish spending which is rampant in our time, don't look upon him as a babe in a manger and neglect him as Lord of Lords. Put Christ into every day of your life. Don't just celebrate his birth, celebrate the fact that he is the Christ and is living today and don't just celebrate a day or a season, celebrate life, every day is Christ-day!

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